

Modernism and Postmodernism: Philosophical Epochs

Arlini Binti Alias,¹ Lam Yik San²

Abstract: The philosophical developments epochs are much influenced by the two schools of thought; the modernists and the postmodernists. There are numbers of literatures being done on the two philosophies, and each looking at the world with different views. Thus, the study aims to review research studies of the way modernists and the postmodernists understand the world in six aspects within the two eras. The paradigm differences between the development of the two intellectual thoughts and movements will also be discussed in details. The literature revealed that although both periods have different perspectives towards philosophical developments, they have contributed major philosophical influences in the field of social sciences. The modernists look at the inherent forces that influence against closure and stasis, whereas the postmodernists investigations are likely to be in the form of a normal science and tend towards closure.

Keywords: modernism, postmodernism, philosophical epochs

Introduction

The contemporary epistemological analyses often capture a principal goal in the distinctions between two major philosophical epochs: modernist and postmodernist approaches especially on their contributions of social sciences and arts. Modernist approach spurred within the period of Enlightenment (1687 to 1789), where the understanding of the universal truth was shaped. Intellectual scholars of this period such as Isaac Newton and Immanuel Kant championed the belief that the world can be saved through the understanding of science (Hoffman, 2005). During this period, the

¹Assistant Professor, English Language and Communication Department, Faculty of Social Science and Liberal Arts, UCSI University Kuala Lumpur (South Wing), Email: arlinialias83@gmail.com

² Email: lamyiksan@yahoo.com

concepts of freedom and individuality had been promoted among the intellectual scholars. Consequently, new concerns among political movements in the western countries were yielded. Among fundamental events and thoughts of modernity include an urge to democracy, capitalism, industrialization, science, and urbanization (Barrett, 1997). One of the major influences of modernist thought propagated the concept of egalitarian social was evidently seen during the political democratic revolutions that took place in America and French.

However, postmodernism as suggested by many literatures, criticize modernity approach as the root to social deconstructions and monarchies systems. The approach to social practices and institutions that legitimate domination and control by powerful society was seen as a contradiction to the actual practice of equality and liberation of all people (Barrett, 1997). Thus, the postmodernist movements began with the rise of riots in Paris in May 1689, where students during this time with the supports from many influential scholars exhibited a protest demanded for radical changes especially in the establishment of elitist European university system (Milovanovic, 1997). The later movement condemned modernity which had initiated monarchy system which in return caused suffers and desolation to the society. This initiation has instigated other suppressive events in the society such as great oppressions among labors who worked under capitalist industrialization, imperialism and the destruction of indigenous peoples.

In the field of philosophy, scholars during the period of modernism (Newton, Descartes and Kant to name a few) were keen with the study of reality and suggested that 'reason' is the source of truth. There are two types of forces which have been identified in shaping how individual and society perceive the truth: the economic forces which are claimed as the surface of society, and psychological forces which are below it that are not bound by the reason (Barrett, 1997). However, the thoughts were criticized by the postmodernist proponents such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, John Dewey, Jacques Derrida, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud who believed that, facts are merely interpretations, and that truth is not absolute as it is constructed by the individual groups (Barrett, 1997). These scholars are also impressed with the thinking that knowledge is mediated by culture and language, therefore, the perception of truth is bound to both culture and language.

Apart from that, there were two competing intellectual movements: structuralism and post-structuralism which both built major studies in the area of arts and language during the two eras.

Structuralism thoughts were pioneered by one of the influential linguists, Ferdinand de Saussure who studied semiotic theory in the examination of language as a system of signs consisting of signifiers (words) and signified (concepts). De Saussure's linguistics investigations on language as a system of signs influenced later scholars to further investigate the association of the systematic signs in societies. He proposed that the concepts of signifiers and signified are designated by a culture. In other words, the concepts and culture are linked to one another. This had marked the beginning of the new paradigm in associating language and culture such as Roland Barthes who investigated De Saussure's concepts on language as a system of sign by initiating studies to explore how language, signs, images, and signifying system systematize the psyche, society and culture (Barrett, 1997). Not only had structuralists expanded their explorations in literature and linguistics, their interest went beyond exploring unconscious code to make hidden rules visible. Similar to modernist considerations, structuralists attempted to observe objectivity and coherence in which they developed scientific theories, and rejected subjective understandings (Hoffman, 2005).

In addition, poststructuralists arose as an act of resistance upon the attempts made by the structuralists on scientific theories, the search of universal truth, and the belief of an unchanging human nature (Barrett, 1997). While modernists presumed that the unified and coherent fundamentals of truth are universally true and applicable, postmodernists on the other hand accept the limitation of multiple views, fragmentation and indeterminacy (Barrett, 1997). Poststructuralists emphasized on the arbitrariness of signs in language, culture and society and claimed that they are subjective and should be considered as natural. Postmodernist went further by opposing to what modernist suggested on the concept of individual as a unified rational being. In contrary, postmodernist regards the individual as being liberated, undetermined and an individual is placed at the center of the universe. The view is supported in Barrett's (1997) maxim from one of the most influential postmodernist scholars; Jean-Paul Sartre's, "*existence precedes essence*" opposing to modernist scholars, Descartes, "*I think, therefore I am*". In other words, postmodernists presumed that the concept of 'self' is shaped from its effect of language, social relations, and the unconscious.

This paper attempts to explore differences between the modernist and the postmodernist paradigms in the development of intellectual thoughts and movements. It also aims to discover the

development of scientific thoughts in social sciences which marked significant philosophical influences of these two eras.

The Philosophical Development and Influences between the two Eras

Based on my reading, the differences of thoughts between modernist and postmodernist can be classified in the following areas:

The Social Structure Construction

Much of the modernist considerations laid in developing theories on society and social developments. The early modernist thoughts can be traced from structural functionalism or totalizing theory, such as the *theory of rationalization* by Weber, Freud's *homeostasis* and Hegel's *Absolute Spirit*. The modernists scholars attempted to clarify forces in social structural development, whereby Freud introduced the concept 'tension-reduction' as the operative force of social structural development (Hoffman, 2005). Apart from that, another influential thought developed during modernist era was the Newtonian physics and its influence.

Besides, postmodernist thoughts developed its basis in its critique towards modernists. They drew their analysis by first looking at the 'disorder' rather than the 'order'. They began their investigation with *paralogism*, by providing special consideration to instabilities (Lyotard, 1984. In Milovanovic, 1997). In Godel's *theorem*, he outlined the details of the impossibility of formal closure, which suggested that the attempt to seek for comprehensive totalizing theory is an illusory exercise. To encounter the earlier discovery made by the modernist scholars in response to social development, postmodernists offered "Dissipative structures", a concept that implies comparative stability and continuous change between 'order' and 'disorder'. As opposed to structural functionalism and the concept of homeostasis, the dissipative structures flourished by the views of the desirability of ongoing and continuous change which are confined by the concept of far-from-equilibrium conditions (Milovanovic, 1997). Furthermore, postmodernist scholars also examined constitutive theory in explaining the association of information between structure and environment (Barrett, 1997). Constitutive theory imposed "the coexistence of multiple sites of determinants in which unique historical articulations are never precisely predictable" (Milovanovic, 1997). The theory imposed that because of the intrinsic uncertainties in initial conditions; therefore iterative practices produce the unpredictable. The theory is not only

explained further on the existence of perpetual fragmentation, deconstruction, and reconstruction, but also assisted the constructions of marginalized, disenfranchised and disempowered (Milovanovic, 1997).

It was during 1960s and 1970s where the arguments in the social sciences paradigm had made its progress which later forced intellectual movements to move towards the postmodernist approach (Hoffman, 2005). Another important work in the analysis of societal structure is the study by the renowned postmodernist scholar, Unger who developed views on an empowered democracy in 1987 and suggested that the orderly disorder should be privileged.

Roles

In the construction of a role in society, the modernists tend to rely on the *Parsonian* construction in which the centripetal forces of society allow an individual to socialize within the society and able to accept the expectations that put onto him or her. This has later raised the questions regarding ‘functional integration’, where roles are bent to become dichotomized such as male and female, employer and employee, good guy and bad guy (Milovanovic, 1997). Other than that, many of modernist social theorists placed great considerations in the ‘*I-me*’ concept, and stressed on the “*me*” domination which indicate that the “*self*” shapes itself with the character required by the condition, and act upon the state to various audiences. In other words, a person is demoted to role-taking (Barrett, 1997).

Contrarily to Postmodernists who view things differently, roles are regarded as fundamentally unstable and there exist a dialectical correlation between centrifugal and centripetal forces. To explain further, two behaviours were examined; a person's conduct in the illegal underworld and a person's conduct in the legitimate world, and when these two behaviors are plotted in a dimension which postmodernist termed as a ‘diagrammatical depiction’, maximal indeterminacy occurs (Milovanovic, 1997). In other words, local indeterminacy exists in a relative inclusive constancy, and that an individual's fate is demoted to role-making (Young, 1994).

Subjectivity/Agency

It was during the Enlightenment period, where the concept transcendental “*self*” was first developed. Since modernists embraced the individualistic notion, whereby an individual is assumed to be conscious, self-directing, reflective, unitary, and transparent, this brought a significant conception homo-duplex understanding in which human nature is said to be a balance of egoism and altruism (Milovanovic, 1997). It is through this understanding that underlines the thought that individual desires act upon sociopolitical systems. Foucault suggested that, ‘the desiring subject becomes a body of passivity and economic or political utility’ (1977. In Milovanovic, 1997). Therefore, desire need to be restrained and coordinated based on diverse dominant discourses. Foucault described that there are two forms of adaptations of desires; passive and active. In the form of passive adaptation, the person is driven towards homeostasis, whereby his or her discursive positions obliged imperatively by the smoothly functioning socioeconomic political order. Active form whereas, is the adaptation implies expressions of alienation, despair, resistance and opposition which lead the oppositional subject to be caught within the “discourse of the hysteric” (Milovanovic, 1997).

Hence, postmodernists offered the notion of ‘*decentered subject*’ as opposed to ‘*centered subject*’ proposed by the modernists. It is suggested that , “the subject is more determined than determining and less unified than a desiring subject caught within the constraints of various discourses and their structuring properties” (Milovanovic, 1997). To clarify further on this notion, Lacan (1977) outlined a concept called *Schema L* that explained the decentered subject. In this schema, he proposed two traversing axes: the unconscious or symbolic axis, and the imaginary axis in which the subject is put at all four corners of this schema. The subject is operationally caught between both symbolic and imaginary axes. The symbolic axis (unconscious) prevails the “*I*”; and the unconscious sphere prevails structured system such as language. The imaginary axis prevails imaginary constructions of the self and the entity through which the “*self*” establishes itself as a coherent (be it illusory) prevails the whole being (Lacan, 1977, in Milovanovic, 1997). Unlike modernists who offered the concept of desire as a responsive force to lack and being a negative, postmodernists offered the notion that desire can be perceived as an ‘onward movement’, which defined the principle of the synthesis of forces whereby the conservative force is perceived as associated with positive processes (Barrett, 1997).

Discourse

In the study of discourse, the Modernists developed models which undertake the notion that discourse is neutral. It is a mechanism used to express rationally which intrinsically projects a centered subject. They argued that there are some transcendental signifiers exist at the center of social structure and phenomena which are discoverable (Hoffman, 2005). Modernists consider the noun rather than the verb forms (Young, 1994). The modernist proponents focus greatly on the conscious level of semiotic construction. They developed a scheme that underlines conscious discourses in two coordinated axes: the paradigmatic axis, which indicates the word choices and the syntagmatic axis, which resume the grammatical location of signifiers. The notion is that these two axes work together in order to produce meaning. Through evolution of history, the modernist thinkers championed the notions on '*discourse*' and '*discursive production*', which aim to observe the effects of discourse in production and reproduction of conventionality.

Postmodernists on the other side do not undertake a neutral discourse. They presume that there are many discourses contemplate the local production sites, which carry the embodiment of desire in signifiers and for the constructions of realities (Young, 1994). The paradigm-syntagm semiotic axis according to postmodernist is the most conscious level of semiotic production (Milovanovic, 1997). Furthermore, postmodernists favor the '*writerly text*' which is seen as more subversive than a '*readerly text*' that would encourage reader or interpreters to imply signification (Barthes, 1974, in Milovanovic, 1997). This according to postmodernists is particularly imperative in a contemporary society which is characterized by the non-referential and the new order of cyberspace (Gibson, 1984, in Milovanovic, 1997). Likewise, they have advocated the further development of the verb over the noun form which would allow us to transcend the limiting metaphysics and metanarratives embedded in subject-verb-object discursive forms (Hoffman, 2005).

Causality

Modernists positioned their notions on the determinism of Newtonian physics which often appears in the form of positivism. They laid their analysis on the basic unit of particles such as assumed autonomous individuals, social elements, and discrete categories in relation to and their contributory effects. The results

will be affected when these the elements mentioned earlier are provided.

However, postmodernists perceive different understanding of the concept. They proposed that the uncertainty, indeterminacy, and disproportional effects are all underlying assumptions and are important questions to explain an event. The notion was supported by Milovanovic (1997), in his statement, "something can arise out of nothing at points identified as singularities; this is the sphere of order arising out of disorder". Postmodernism simply lays their notion in restating the earlier concepts developed and re-computes answers from different angles using the similar approach. It is from this framework that Derrida applied to study how words obtain new meaning in new contexts (Milovanovic, 1997). Thus, postmodernists value small contributions as having profound possibilities. Therefore, causation can be attributed to field rather than particle effects (Bohm, 1980, in Milovanovic, 1997). In the postmodernity, certainties which occur are often seen as the creation of subjects. Young (1994) explained that a subject needs horizons to find semiotic fictions that produce the appearance of a centered subject. For postmodernist scholars, such as Foucault, it is the "fear of the chaotic and the unclassifiable that accounts for the order we attribute to nature" (Milovanovic, 1997).

Knowledge

The modernity is driven by the notion developed by the Enlightenment which tendered formal rational methods in totalizing truth. Lyotard (1989, in Milovanovic, 1997) explained how scientific knowledge has seized narrative knowledge, and how the establishment of new navigating instruments which are influenced by power affect rational action. Narrative knowledge is based on myth, legend and tales, which provide peripheral resources of being in society, and therefore this knowledge embraces imagination, whereas scientific knowledge tends to move towards closure. The modernist investigations on the concept of 'truth' was majorly guided by the establishing of 'Absolute Postulates' from which all other "facts" can be explained by deductive (linear) logic (Barrett, 1997).

Besides, postmodernists view knowledge as constantly fragmented, partial and contingent (Milovanovic, 1997) as it always embodies multiple sites of production. This understating was drawn from a dialogic pedagogy where the original signifiers are reproduced through the process of review which denotes the development of a language possibility. In other words,

postmodernists uphold local knowledge. Furthermore, postmodernists observed local knowledge(s) as not necessarily subsumable under one logic (Godel's theorem), in which they outlines subjects within a social formation as disillusioned in their attempts to be true to their desires, and that the proposition of 'space' always threaten the dominant forms of knowledge. Postmodernists regard knowledge as constantly relational and positional (Milovanovic, 1997). Power and knowledge are found to be intricately connected. Therefore, in order to acquire a discursive formation, one must acquire the logic and rationality embedded within it (Foucault, 1973, in Milovanovic, 1997). That is where the truth becomes 'discourse specific'.

Conclusion

It is clear that both periods contributed major philosophical influences in the field of social sciences although there are massive clashes of notion between the two proponents. In the six aspects discussed: social structure, roles, subjectivity, discourse, causality and knowledge, the beliefs of the modernists have seen to become dominant in the modern period whereas the trend changed when the postmodernists came to believe there are multiple ways of knowing and soon started to question the modernists approaches. The comparison of both approaches evidently highlight that the postmodernists take on investigations on the form of a normal science and tend toward closure, the modernists on the other hand, look at the inherent forces that influence against closure and stasis.

References

- Barrett, T. (1997). *Modernism and Postmodernism: An Overview with Art Examples*. Huchens J. & Suggs, M. (ed.). Washington DC: NAEA
- Derrida, J. (1973). *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press
- Hoffman, L. (2005). *The Three Major Philosophical Epochs*. Retrieved on January 2nd, 2013 from: http://www.postmodernpsychology.com/Philosophical_Systems/Overview.htm
- Milovanovic, D. (1997). *Dueling Paradigms: Modernist versus Postmodernist Thought*. Department of Criminal Justice. Northeastern: Illinois University. (Revised version from Humanity and Society. 19(1): 1-22, 1995)
- Whorf, B. (1956). *Language, Thought, and Reality*. Carrol, J. (ed.). New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Young, T.R. (1992). *Chaos Theory and Human Agency: Humanist Sociology in a Postmodern Era*. Humanity and Society 16(4): pp441-60.